



Find and Focus on the  
Work You Were Created to Do

# MASTER *of* ONE

**Jordan Raynor**

Best-selling Author of *Called to Create*

Praise for  
*Master of One*

“We are rightly inspired and grateful for all Jesus Christ did in his essential mission in life. But it is also breathtaking to consider what he *didn't do*. As the ultimate Essentialist, he modeled the disciplined pursuit of less. This is beautifully illustrated in Jordan Raynor's *Master of One*.”

—GREG MCKEOWN, *New York Times* best-selling author  
of *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*

“I tell people all the time ‘You can't do it all,’ but then I catch myself trying to complete just a few more things as my to-do list mushrooms every morning. I'm thankful Jordan Raynor has set out such a clear alternative that teaches you how to choose what you want most in your career and how to ignore everything else.”

—JON ACUFF, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Finish:  
Give Yourself the Gift of Done*

“In a culture where we're told we can be anyone and do anything, Jordan Raynor makes a compelling case for embracing our vocational limits and choosing to do our one thing well.”

—EMILY P. FREEMAN, *Wall Street Journal* best-selling author  
of *The Next Right Thing*

“The Lord wants us to be excellent in what we do. He's placed us in our careers, and we have a responsibility to be the very best we can be in whatever field we decide to take up. We should run to win. Jordan's book will show you how.”

—TONY DUNGY, Pro Football Hall of Fame coach and *New York  
Times* best-selling author

“The topic of this book speaks to my heart and will serve well everyone who reads it.”

—HORST SCHULZE, cofounder of Ritz-Carlton and author  
of *Excellence Wins*

“When I started my nonprofit, there were a million ideas swirling around, and a wise humanitarian encouraged me to deeply focus on one thing. That one thing was water, and that encouragement began a movement that’s helped ten million people across the globe get clean water. Jordan Raynor gives the same advice in this book, showing you precisely how to find and focus on your one thing.”

—SCOTT HARRISON, founder and CEO of charity: water  
and *New York Times* best-selling author of *Thirst*

“In *Master of One*, Jordan Raynor uses real-life examples to point the way to a satisfied life, one of purpose, meaning, and happiness.”

—SHERRON WATKINS, Enron whistle-blower and *Time*  
magazine’s 2002 Person of the Year

“Christians ought to have the highest standards for excellence in our work. That’s the heart of this book, and I am so grateful Jordan has written it.”

—BOBBY BOWDEN, second-winningest coach in Division 1 college  
football history

“Jordan Raynor writes with a clear and powerful conviction—the path to exceptional work is not about more work but about better work. Excellence is waiting for us if we will just dig in.”

—CAREY NIEUWHOF, founding pastor of Connexus Church

“My stepfather, C. S. Lewis, used to say, ‘We do not need more people writing Christian books. What we need is more Christians writing good

books.’ This is true for any Christian in any line of work. I am thrilled that Jordan Raynor has taken the time to explore this idea more fully in *Master of One*.”

—DOUGLAS GRESHAM, stepson of C. S. Lewis and executive producer of Disney’s and Netflix’s *Chronicles of Narnia* films

“Both social science and God’s Word refute the conventional wisdom that simply following your passions will lead to the ultimate satisfaction of vocation. In *Master of One*, Jordan Raynor articulately argues that we find true vocational happiness when we focus first on bringing joy to God and others by doing our work masterfully well.”

—MISSY WALLACE, executive director of the Nashville Institute for Faith and Work

“Work is an opportunity to serve the world. But if we are to serve well, we ought to have the highest standards of excellence in our work. This book will help you find and focus on the work you can do most masterfully well.”

—JEFF GOINS, best-selling author of *The Art of Work* and *Real Artists Don’t Starve*

“Jordan Raynor does an awesome job communicating how the gospel impacts our work—especially the work of the entrepreneur and culture maker.”

—HENRY KAESTNER, cofounder of Bandwidth and founder of Faith Driven Entrepreneur

“Jordan Raynor is definitely speaking to me when thinking about the master multitasker. I already have joy for living life for an audience of one, but I can’t wait to learn the principles to find focus and precision within my life.”

—TAMIKA CATCHINGS, four-time Olympic gold medalist, ten-time WNBA All-Star, and former WNBA MVP

“Serve the world by picking a lane and getting masterfully good at your craft. This book will show you how.”

—CHRIS GRAEBE, host of the *StartupCamp* podcast

“I loved *Master of One*! Jordan’s writing frees you from the paralysis of indecisiveness and provides a simple framework for choosing the work you will do most masterfully well for the glory of God.”

—STEFAN KUNZ, letterer, designer, and illustrator behind  
@stefankunz on Instagram and YouTube

“Jordan Raynor offers a practical guide to finding and focusing on the work you can do most exceptionally well—not for your own sake but to bring benefit to the world. We need this message right now. And the great news is that this book exhibits what it teaches: it is a book on mastery that is masterfully written.”

—MATT PERMAN, director of career development at the King’s  
College, New York City, and author of *What’s Best Next*

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# MASTER *of* ONE

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WATERBROOK

## MASTER OF ONE

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*To Kara, whose loving sacrifice  
allows me to pursue mastery of the  
work the Father has created me to do.*



# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	xi
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## **PART I: THE PURPOSE *of* MASTERY**

Chapter 1: Excellence in All Things . . . . .	3
Chapter 2: Proclaiming the Excellencies of God . . . . .	21
Chapter 3: The Ministry of Excellence . . . . .	39

## **PART II: THE PATH *to* MASTERY**

Chapter 4: Start with “The One” in Mind . . . . .	57
Chapter 5: Explore . . . . .	77
Chapter 6: Choose . . . . .	97
Chapter 7: Eliminate . . . . .	117
Chapter 8: Master . . . . .	135

## **PART III: THE PROMISE *of* MASTERY**

Chapter 9: Salt and Light . . . . .	157
Chapter 10: The Room Where It Happens . . . . .	175
Chapter 11: Share the Master’s Happiness . . . . .	189

Acknowledgments . . . . .	201
Notes . . . . .	205



# Introduction

There's an old saying that goes, "He's a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none," used to describe someone who is good at many different things but not excellent at any one of them. Early in my career this described me perfectly. By the time I was twenty-five, I had already had nearly a dozen jobs, including working in a call center, playing piano for tips, selling newspapers, working for a tech startup, starting and selling my own tech startup, running a political campaign, and interning at the White House. Along the way I picked up a diverse set of skills that helped me achieve a reasonable level of success and a more-than-healthy dose of self-confidence.

But one of my mentors and personal heroes was about to cut me down to size. Sitting across the table at lunch was Rick Mortensen, a master of one craft, whose career looked quite different from mine. Rick had spent nearly three decades building an incredibly successful civil engineering practice. It seemed like everyone in the community knew and respected Rick due to his excellent work and that of his firm. But Rick wasn't just excellent at the office; he was also an excellent husband, father, and follower of Jesus Christ. Rick was the real deal, and every time he agreed to have lunch with me, I tried to soak in as much wisdom as I could.

The topic of conversation at this particular lunch was my career. I was considering leaving the company that had bought my first startup, and I wanted Rick's advice on the next professional move I should make. As I reminded him of the winding road my career had taken up

to that point, he leaned forward and asked me a question I'll never forget: "Jordan, what is the one thing you want to *really* sink your teeth into?" The question caught me off guard. *One thing?* I repeated in my head. The question seemed unanswerable. There were *so* many things I wanted to do in my work. How in the world could I choose just one to focus on?

While Rick was too gracious to say it, he was pointing out that I was a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none. While it pained me to admit it, he was right. I had yet to find "my thing" that I was prepared to go big on, or in the words of my mentor, to "sink my teeth into." But as the weeks and months after that lunch went by, I realized Rick was asking an essential question that I had to answer for myself.

## MASTERS OF NONE

I don't think my story is unique. In fact, I think it is more common now than ever before. Perhaps the most significant research ever conducted on the topic of excellence in the workplace was completed by Dr. Anders Ericsson, who found that in order to achieve mastery in any field, one must spend roughly ten thousand hours purposefully practicing that skill.<sup>1</sup> *Ten thousand hours!* To put that in perspective, let's do some quick math. Let's assume that you work an average of fifty hours per week, and you spend twenty of those fifty hours checking email and responding to the seemingly endless inbound requests that demand your attention. That leaves you with thirty hours a week to work on the particular skill you are seeking to master. Even if you were somehow able to lock yourself in a room and never take another meeting or call again, it would still take you more than *six years* to achieve mastery.

Given the way we work today, it's no wonder we are a society of jacks-and-jills-of-all-trades and masters of none. A recent study found that 21 percent of millennials reported changing jobs in the last year.<sup>2</sup> Another study found that this most recent generation of workers will change jobs four times in their first decade out of college.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps the most significant trend in our society's move away from mastery is the rise of the "gig economy" with people of all ages trading in traditional full-time employment for a smorgasbord of different part-time jobs. Some experts estimate that more than 40 percent of the American workforce will be independent contractors by the time this book is in your hands!<sup>4</sup>

But this is not a book about the gig economy, and I'm not trying to make you feel guilty about hopping from job to job. Trust me, I am the *last* person who can criticize professional exploration. (My average tenure in any given endeavor is roughly two years.) I cite the research above to make a point I think we all intuitively know to be true: many of us are making "a millimeter of progress in a million directions" with our lives and our careers.<sup>5</sup> We are good at a lot of different things, but we aren't excellent, masterful, or exceptional at any one of them. We are overcommitted, overwhelmed, and overstressed, spending way too much time focused on minutiae rather than the work we believe God created us to do.

**We are overcommitted, overwhelmed, and overstressed, spending way too much time focused on minutiae rather than the work we believe God created us to do.**

As you will see later in this book, being a jack-of-all-trades is not bad in and of itself. Most of the time it is simply a good and inevitable

by-product of exploring our calling. But the idea of being described as a mediocre “master of none” should make us Christians sick to our stomachs. Why? Because mediocre work fails to accomplish the essence of the Christian life: to serve others and to glorify God.

You and I are called to be image bearers of the exceptional God. In Ephesians 5:1, Paul instructs the church “as beloved children” to “be imitators of God” (ESV). Commenting on this passage, theologian Andreas Köstenberger writes, “How should we respond to God’s excellence? In short, we should seek to imitate and emulate it. . . . As God’s redeemed children, we are to strive to be like God. This, it appears, includes striving for excellence.”<sup>6</sup> John Piper put it this way: “God created me—and you—to live with a single, all-embracing, all-transforming passion—namely, a passion to glorify God by enjoying and displaying his supreme excellence in all the spheres of life.”<sup>7</sup> Are we as the church doing such masterful work that the world can see the “supreme excellence” of the Father shining through his children? Or are we masters of none, doing mediocre or perhaps even good work but little that’s excellent enough to make the world take notice of the exceptional God we serve?

One of my favorite descriptions of Jesus comes from Mark 7:37: “People were overwhelmed with amazement. ‘He [Jesus] has done everything well.’” As followers of Christ we are to seek to imitate Jesus in every way imaginable. Can we honestly say we are doing *everything* well? Can we say we are doing *anything* masterfully well?

When we are stretched as thin as most of us are today, we are all but guaranteed to do everything with mediocrity rather than mastery. As Köstenberger pointed out, “This mediocrity has in many cases become a curse—a curse that has kept us from reaching our personal, creative, and [professional] potential given to us by God, and has prevented us

from impacting other believers as well as unbelievers for the glory of God and for his kingdom.”<sup>8</sup>

Years ago, Franky Schaeffer summarized this idea in a book titled *Addicted to Mediocrity*. While I agree with much of what Schaeffer says in that volume, I take issue with the idea that it is mediocrity to which we are addicted. Nobody enjoys feeling as if they are doing shoddy work. We all yearn to be masters of a craft. But we *are* addicted to something else that leads to mediocrity: the idea of more. For too long we have believed the lie that more activity, more roles, and more responsibility equals greater effectiveness. As this book will show, nothing could be further from the truth. The path to doing our best work for God’s glory and the good of others is the path of “less but better.”<sup>9</sup>

So, in a world with an unprecedented flexibility and number of options for our work, how do we avoid becoming masters of none? How do we find the work we can do most exceptionally well in service of God and others? What is the solution to being a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none? The solution is becoming a *master of one*.

## MASTERS OF ONE

While you’re likely familiar with the phrase “jack-of-all-trades, master of none,” you may not know that the saying is rumored to be a misquote of Benjamin Franklin, who supposedly encouraged his readers to be a “Jack of all trades, and a master of *one*.”<sup>10</sup> It appears that Franklin was making an entirely different point than how the phrase is understood today. He was saying that, while it is good to be well-rounded and have a wide variety of interests, skills, and hobbies, there ought to be one thing that we go big on, that we sink our teeth into, that we pursue mastery of.

Whether or not Franklin was the one to utter this phrase is irrelevant. The fact is that in order to best glorify God and love others through our vocations, we must do our work with excellence. And we can't do our most excellent work until we discern the work God has created us to do most exceptionally well, and then, once we've found it, focus on becoming a master of that craft. Throughout this book I will build a case around this core idea, leaning heavily on God's Word, extensive research of the world's best business and scientific literature, my own personal experiences, and the stories of more than twenty Christians who are undeniable masters of one vocational thing. I am confident you will walk away after reading this book convinced of what so many others have come to hold as a central truth of life: the path to making the greatest impact through our work is the path of less but better, of continually pruning our careers in order to focus on the work we were created to do most exceptionally well for the glory of God and the good of others.

Except for God's Word, perhaps no book has influenced this more than Greg McKeown's *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. In it, McKeown said, "When individuals are involved in too many disparate activities—even good activities—they can fail to achieve their essential mission."<sup>11</sup> I don't think anybody in history understood this better than Jesus himself. Even though the Son of God was omnipotent—fully God *and* fully man—he still displayed a remarkable understanding of the natural limits time and attention place on our ability to fulfill our "essential mission," or what Jesus referred to as the work the Father gave him to do (see John 17:4).

In the gospel of Luke, we are told, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). Another translation says that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusa-

lem.” The picture here isn’t one of Jesus scattering himself across a myriad of nonessential activities. Jesus was laser focused on his one thing: preaching the good news of redemption in word and in deed from Galilee to Judea and ultimately to a cross in Jerusalem. Along the way to fulfilling that mission, Jesus stopped by the home of Mary and Martha in what has become a legendary biblical account. As Luke shared:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” (10:38–42)

Jesus had the mind-set of an essentialist on his way to fulfilling the one thing the Father called him to do, and here he is teaching Mary and Martha to do the same. In that moment the one essential thing was not cooking another dish or cleaning up the house—it was sitting at the feet of Jesus. Commenting on this passage, Pastor Timothy Keller hit the nail on the head: “[Mary] decided what was important, and she did not let the day-to-day get her away from that. As a result, she was drawn into a greatness we don’t even dream of. Because we are more like Martha than Mary, we’re sinking in a sea of mediocrity.”<sup>12</sup>

The world is constantly pressuring us to be more like Martha than

Mary, convincing us that the path to happiness and impact is the path of more—more jobs, more skills, more responsibility, more information, more fun, and more money. But here Jesus offers us a better, simpler, saner way. He offers us the path of less but better: “*Few things are needed . . . indeed only one.*” In a world full of Marthas, let us allow Jesus’s words to permeate every aspect of our lives, especially our work. Instead of scattering our gifts and energy in a million different directions, let us seek the one vocational thing we believe the Father has given us to do and then master that work for his glory and the good of others.

## A GUIDE TO THIS BOOK

In my previous book *Called to Create*, I make the case that our work is one of the primary ways we reveal God’s character to the world and love and serve our neighbors as ourselves. This book builds upon that theme, helping you find, focus on, and master the work God has created you to do most exceptionally well.

I’ve divided the book into three parts. In part 1 we will dig deeper into “The Purpose of Mastery,” a topic we have just begun to explore. These first three chapters will continue making the case that, as Christians, we ought to have the highest standards for excellence in our work and that the strategy for producing exceptional work is to master one vocational thing at a time. In chapter 1, NFL Hall of Fame coach Tony Dungy will help us understand the biblical mandate for “excellence in all things” and how that mandate forces us to be incredibly focused in our work. In chapter 2 we will see how masterful work can proclaim the excellencies of God by visiting la Sagrada Família in Barcelona, Spain, the world’s largest church, and by getting to know an

Olympic gold medalist before and after his salvation. Finally, in chapter 3, you will meet a neonatal intensive care unit nurse and the National Basketball Association's first black female CEO, both of whom demonstrate how focused, excellent work is necessary to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Part 2 is the longest and most practical section of the book. In it we will walk together along “The Path to Mastery”: a biblical approach to finding and focusing on the one thing God has created you to do most exceptionally well in your work. This is a process so nuanced that it can't be reduced to a one-size-fits-all formula. However, through my extensive research and interviews, I have uncovered clear themes that will help you discover and master the work God has called you to do. In chapter 4 we will define what we're looking for in our “one thing” and make the important distinction that our chosen area of focus can be specific or quite broad, as in the case of C. S. Lewis, who applied his one masterful skill of teaching in many different contexts. Then, with a clear picture of what it is we are looking for in our one thing, we will spend chapters 5 through 8 walking down the path to mastery together, with each chapter dedicated to one of the four steps: Explore, Choose, Eliminate, and Master. In this part of the book, we will answer questions such as:

- What is the quickest path to experimenting with and choosing your one vocational thing?
- How do you know when you've found your one thing or, in other words, your calling?
- Is a calling something you choose or something that chooses you?
- Once you've said yes to your one thing, how do you practically say no to everything else?

- How do you get masterful at something if you can't find the right mentor?
- What are the keys to mastery that separate masters from their less masterful counterparts?

To help answer these questions, you will read compelling stories of masters you may know (such as Fred Rogers, Chip and Joanna Gaines, Emily Ley, and charity: water's Scott Harrison) and many you likely don't know (including a teacher, a pilot, and a social entrepreneur).

Finally, in part 3 you will hear inspiring stories that illustrate "The Promise of Mastery." In chapter 9 you will hear from Lecrae, Andrew Stanton (director of *Stranger Things* and *Finding Nemo*), and Douglas Gresham (producer of *Chronicles of Narnia* films), who make a compelling case that masterful work helps Christians fulfill their role as salt and light (see Matthew 5:13–15). In chapter 10 you will meet masters who have leveraged their power for the good of others, including Sheron Watkins, a Christ follower who, through her excellent work as an accountant at Enron Corporation, was in a position to help bring down one of the largest and most corrupt companies in US history. Finally, in chapter 11 we will unpack the biblical promise that when we pursue masterful work as a means of glorifying God and serving others, we are invited to share in our heavenly Master's happiness.

Throughout this book (and especially in part 2), you will likely find yourself wanting a more hands-on tool as you seek to find, focus on, and master your one vocational thing. To facilitate this I have developed a free "Master of One Notebook," filled with practical prompts, additional resources, and plenty of space for you to work out how the ideas in this book apply to your own work. This is also a great tool to help you work through the concepts of this book with a small group. To download the free notebook, visit [jordanraynor.com/MOO](http://jordanraynor.com/MOO).

## YOUR ONE THING

In the months and years after that lunch with my mentor Rick, his question stayed tucked away in the back of my mind: “*What is the one thing you want to really sink your teeth into?*” Through many years of trials and failures, prayers and pivots, the Lord made it clear to me what my one thing is: I am an entrepreneur, skilled in the art of taking calculated risks to create new things for the good of others.

While my one thing is fairly broad, I apply it with an ever-increasing amount of focus. When I started writing this book, I was applying my skills as an entrepreneur to just two projects: writing books like this one and running the venture-backed tech startup, Threshold 360,

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as its CEO. Through tremendous personal sacrifice, I was able to fulfill both of those roles with excellence for a while; but as this book began to take shape, I became so convinced of its core thesis that I decided to do what many people told me was crazy—I replaced myself as CEO of Threshold in order to focus all my professional energy on creating products like the one you hold in your hand. That was the most difficult decision I’ve ever made professionally. And while it required me to leave a team I love (and a relatively stable income), I’m totally convinced the decision was necessary. Why? Because I’ve learned what I believe you will be convinced of by the end of this book: the path to doing our most exceptional work is the path of less but better. It’s not about filling up your calendar or spreading yourself so thin that you can’t possibly fulfill your commitments with any degree of excellence. You achieve true mastery when you identify the few things God has created you to do

most exceptionally well and work at them “with all your heart, as working for the Lord” (Colossians 3:23).

Maybe you’re at a turning point in your career but you have no idea where God is calling you next. Maybe you’re doing work today that you believe to be “your thing,” but you’re looking for a fresh perspective on the topic of vocation. Or maybe you committed to your one professional thing years ago, and you are looking to better understand what you can do to become a world-class master of your craft. Wherever you are on the path to mastery, this book is for you. I pray the Lord uses this book to build stronger conviction about the work he has called you to do and that you walk away with a treasure trove of practical wisdom to help you do more exceptional work for the glory of God and the good of others.

Let’s begin!



Part I

**THE PURPOSE**  
*of* **MASTERY**



## Chapter 1

# Excellence in All Things

Whether you eat or drink or whatever  
you do, do it all for the glory of God.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:31



**T**here's no denying that Tony Dungy was a master of his craft. During his twenty-eight-year career, Dungy rose to become one of the most successful and beloved coaches in the history of the National Football League. In his first job as a head coach, Dungy did the seemingly impossible by turning the perennially pathetic Tampa Bay Buccaneers into a playoff-bound powerhouse. Then, after a move to Indianapolis, Dungy led the Colts to their first Super Bowl victory in thirty-six years, making Dungy the first African American head coach to ever hoist the Vince Lombardi Trophy.

As anyone close to Dungy will tell you, the soft-spoken coach is intensely passionate about the pursuit of excellence, holding the highest standards for himself and his players. But what inspired Dungy to work with such a passion for exceptionalism? Much like the other masters throughout this book, Dungy's motivation for excellence in his work stemmed from something much deeper, more sustainable, and more God honoring than the pursuit of fame, fortune, and trophies. Dungy was inspired by his parents—both of whom were masterful educators—to pursue excellence as a means of glorifying God and serving others. Remembering his parents' example, Dungy said, "My parents were definitions of excellence in teaching. It was important to them to be the best that they could be—not for personal reasons, but that was their concept of serving. They wanted to serve people in the best way possible."<sup>1</sup>

That commitment to mastery had a lasting impact on Dungy, who

has thought a lot about excellence throughout his career. “Excellence is doing something at the very highest level it can be done using all your capabilities and everything God has given you,” Dungy said. “I talk about excellence a lot, because I think from a Christian perspective, that can get lost sometimes. . . . We don’t always think of excellence as a Christian concept, but I think God does desire us to be excellent at what we do. . . . Just because we’re Christians doesn’t mean we should take the approach to just move forward and let the Lord handle it. . . . He wants us to be excellent in what we do. He’s placed us in our careers. . . . We do have a responsibility to be the very best we can be in whatever field we decide to take up. We all run to receive a prize and to win. I never want to forget that part of it. We should run to win.”<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his career, Dungy won a lot. If there was ever a doubt that Dungy was a master of his craft as a coach, his induction into the NFL’s Pro Football Hall of Fame certainly removed that skepticism. As Dungy took the stage in Canton, Ohio, to receive the Ring of Excellence, the audience of adoring fans, family, and former players erupted in rapturous applause. Clearly these fans were celebrating Dungy’s excellence on the field. But as anyone who knows Dungy will tell you, they were applauding something much more; they were celebrating a man who understands that, while he is called to be excellent in his work, his faith commands him to be excellent in *all* things, including as a husband and father.

In a moving speech, Marvin Harrison (Dungy’s former player and fellow Hall of Fame inductee) addressed his former coach directly, saying, “Coach Dungy. My final head coach. I could sit up here for . . . fifteen minutes and tell you about how important it was to have you as my coach and talk about football. But what you brought to our team and to me was more important than anything. You taught us how to be

teammates. You taught us how to be men. But the most important thing is you taught us about fatherhood. . . . So, I want to thank you for that.”<sup>3</sup>

Harrison’s sentiment has been echoed by countless players Dungy has coached and mentored throughout his career. But Dungy didn’t just tell others how to be an excellent father; he modeled it. I grew up in Tampa Bay, and I still remember seeing Dungy with his kids at sporting events where my friends and I were playing. Even at the height of his career, Dungy always seemed to make the time to cheer his kids on from the sidelines.

“If you’re only focused on excellence in your job or excellence on the field, you will get totally out of balance and out of whack,” Dungy said. “Yes, I need to be excellent as a coach. I need to be excellent as a Christian. I need to be excellent as a father. I need to be excellent as a person in the community and strive for that excellence everywhere and not just in one area.”<sup>4</sup>

Dungy’s comments bring to mind the motto of the late, great pastor, Dr. D. James Kennedy, who encouraged his congregation to pursue “excellence in all things and all things to God’s glory.”<sup>5</sup> While this book is primarily about excellence in your chosen work, Kennedy and Dungy remind us of a biblical truth that is critical to understand before we progress past this first chapter: As Christians, God has called us to be excellent in *all* things, not just in our chosen vocation. 1 Corinthians 10:31 makes clear the standard we are called to: “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” In

**It is precisely because we are called to be excellent in all things that we can’t commit to being excellent at many things.**

*whatever* we do, we are to do it *all* for the glory of God, never settling for anything short of excellence.

*Glorify* is a word we throw around so much in Christian circles that it has become tragically difficult to define. In fact, one of the most highlighted passages in the Kindle edition of my previous book is John Piper's definition of *glorify*. Since so many people found that definition helpful, allow me to reintroduce it here. According to Piper, "‘Glorifying’ means feeling and thinking and acting in ways that *reflect his greatness*, that make much of God, that give evidence of the supreme greatness of all his attributes and the all-satisfying beauty of his manifold perfections" (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

You and I are called to reflect God's greatness and imitate his character to the world. This is the very essence of what it means to glorify God. But what is his character? Scripture describes God in many ways, but it is his character of excellence that is perhaps most visible to us. So, when Scripture commands that in "whatever you do," you "do it all for the glory of God," we are being called to the passionate pursuit of excellence in whatever we commit ourselves to.

All of us have been called to multiple roles in life. We have been called to be excellent wives and husbands, mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, friends and church members. If we are going to fulfill all these callings with excellence while also pursuing excellence in our chosen work, it is going to require a tremendous amount of focus in our careers. Again, recall Dr. Anders Ericsson's study, which states that mastery of any vocation requires roughly ten thousand hours of "purposeful practice." The reality is that excellence requires an unusual amount of hard work and dedication. Given this, and the many things outside our careers that God has called us to be excellent in, there is simply no way we can pursue mastery at many things professionally at

the same time. It defies the laws of science and time. It is precisely because we are called to be excellent in all things that we can't commit to being excellent at many things.

You and I have a choice to be either a master of none or a master of one. We must pick a path. The path to excellence in our work is the path of singularity. If we want to make our greatest contribution to the world for the glory of God and the good of others, we are going to have to adopt the mind-set of a craftsperson and get really focused and insanely good at the thing God has put us on this earth to do.

**The path to excellence in our work is the path of singularity.**

If you are still harboring some resistance to this idea that the path to excellence is the path of less but better, I'm willing to bet that you have been a victim of being sold one (or more) of three lies about work and calling that are so pervasive today they often go unchecked. If we are to pursue excellence in all things for the glory of God and the good of others, we need to challenge the following conventional wisdom and replace these lies with biblical truths.

### **LIE #1: YOU CAN BE ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BE**

John Mark Comer would love to have been a professional basketball player. As a kid, he loved watching *Pistol Pete*, the classic movie about Pete Maravich who, through years of practice, grew to become a basketball great. Comer dreamed of living a similar story and eventually playing for the National Basketball Association (NBA). "There was just one problem," Comer said. "I *suck* at basketball. I mean, I'm really, *really* bad at it. It took me a while to figure that out, and then I had to

go bury the dream in my backyard, along with my ball and jersey. It was a sad day.”<sup>7</sup>

Today, Comer is the teaching pastor at Bridgetown Church in Portland, Oregon. He’s also one of my favorite authors.\* One of the things I love about Comer is that he is super clear about the work God has called him to master. “Usually God’s calling is a short list—just a few things,” Comer said. “In my case, I’m called to lead my church, teach the Scriptures, and bring my family along for the ride. That’s what I’m saying yes to.”<sup>8</sup>

But while Comer is clear on his mission, he empathizes with others still searching for the work God has created them to do. This is largely due to Comer’s recognition that for way too long we have been sold the pervasive lie that we can be anything we want to be. “I was brought up in a culture that essentially said, John Mark, you can do anything you put your mind to,” Comer said. “If you work hard enough, if you believe in yourself, if you’re patient, you can do anything. This is *such* a middle-class-and-above American way to think. Nobody in the developing world would ever talk like that. . . . But . . . this idea of ‘I can be anything I want’ is bred into us by our ancestry. And it’s not all bad. It gave me the courage to dream and ideate and step out in life. But it’s also dangerous because, sadly, *it’s not true*. I *can’t* be anything I want to be, no matter how hard I work or how much I believe in myself. All I can be is *me*. Who the Creator made John Mark to be.”<sup>9</sup>

Comer hits the nail on the head, expounding upon a truth that is embedded deeply in Scripture: God has created each of us uniquely, with particular passions and gifts. The Bible doesn’t portray God as

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\* Seriously, if you have yet to read Comer’s *Garden City*, put this book down and go read that.

some manager of a cosmic manufacturing plant, pushing a button and sitting back to watch the production of millions of homogenous humans. No, all throughout Scripture, the biblical authors use beautiful language to portray God as an intentional craftsman, putting time and great care into the design of each unique human being. Consider the following verses (emphasis added):

Before I *formed you* in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart. (Jeremiah 1:5)

Your hands *shaped me* and *made me*. Will you now turn and destroy me? Remember that you *molded me* like clay. (Job 10:8–9)

For you created my inmost being; you *knit me* together in my mother's womb. (Psalm 139:13)

You get the point. God has meticulously designed each one of us. As the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12:6, this includes God's granting of "different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us." God created you and me with a unique mix of passions and talents, and he has called us to steward those gifts well. In other words, there are certain kinds of work that God has designed us to do exceptionally well and, naturally, other kinds of work at which we are unlikely to excel.

But haven't technology, access to information, and economic prosperity made it possible for us to choose to do nearly any work imaginable? No doubt. We are living at a time when we have an unprecedented number of options for our work. Now more than ever we have the

ability to choose virtually any career we want. However, just because we have more options doesn't mean we can do everything with excellence.

Pretend for a second that you have decided you want your car to be a boat. You live near a lake and have the option to drive your car into the water; but if you do, you aren't going to get very far. Your car may be an excellent car, but it is never going to be an exceptional boat. Why? Because your car was designed to be a car, not a boat.

The same is true for you and me in our careers. Yes, you can choose to be anything you want to be. But if our mandate is "excellence in all things and all things for God's glory," we would be wise to understand how God has created us and choose work that aligns with his design, ensuring that we make our greatest possible contribution to the world. If we choose work that is out of line with the gifts God has given us, we may be temporarily satisfied, but we won't be on the path to mastery, with the potential to become the very best versions of ourselves for the sake of God's glory and the good of others.

No matter how hard John Mark Comer tries, he's never going to play basketball in the NBA. He may enjoy shooting hoops in the front yard with his kids, but basketball is never going to be the one thing that Comer does masterfully well. In the words of the old US Army slogan, we can only "Be all we can be." You and I aren't called to "Be all we *want* to be" or "Be all we *choose* to be." We are called to be the most excellent versions of who God has *created* us to be. Comer put this well when he said, "Our job isn't to fit into some mold or prove something to the world; it's to unlock who God's made us to be, and then go be it."<sup>10</sup>

The lie that we can be anything we want to be is particularly dangerous because it paves the way to a second, more subtle lie that so many of us have fallen for.

## LIE #2: YOU CAN DO EVERYTHING YOU WANT TO DO

Lounging in the living room of our townhouse in Tallahassee, I declared to my college roommates that I wanted to move to Nashville to be a songwriter.

“Of course you do,” my roommate Ryan said, rolling his eyes as he hopped off the couch and exited the room. When he returned, Ryan was carrying a pen and a pad of paper. “Okay, let’s make a list of everything you’ve ever said you wanted to do.” It took almost no time for my roommates and me to fill the page with a long and diverse list of my ambitions, which included (but were certainly not limited to) president of the United States, Oscar-winning composer, cast member of a Broadway musical, best-selling author, flight attendant, cruise ship piano player, speechwriter, Josh Lyman from *The West Wing*, and television producer.

“You’re going to need nine lives to accomplish half of this,” Ryan said. The comment made in jest illustrates a more serious point: when we adopt the lie that we can be anything we want to be, we can easily fall for the tangential lie that we can do everything we want to do, ignoring the laws of time and trade-offs. In his book *Essentialism*, Greg McKeown put it this way: “The idea that we can have it all and do it all is not new. This myth has been peddled for so long, I believe virtually everyone alive today is infected with it. It is sold in advertising. It is championed in corporations. It is embedded in job descriptions that provide huge lists of required skills and experience as standard. It is embedded in university applications that require dozens of extracurricular activities. What *is* new is how especially damaging this myth is today, in a time when choice and expectations have increased exponentially.”<sup>11</sup>

The truth is, you can't "do it all" so long as you accept that God has called you to excellence in all things. I'm reminded of this every time I look at a restaurant menu that offers a smorgasbord of different cuisines. Sorry, but there is simply no way a restaurant serving Mexican food and

**You can't "do it all" so long as you accept that God has called you to excellence in all things.**

barbecue and pizza and sushi is going to produce any dish with excellence. It's just not possible.\* The same is true in our vocations. We can't be anything we want to be and we can't do everything we want to do so long as we are committed to offering the Lord and the world our very best.

There are two primary limits on our ability to do everything we want to do well: time and attention. Throughout Scripture, God is constantly reminding his people of the brevity of life. We only have so much time on this earth to accomplish the mission God sets before us. For this reason, the biblical authors call for us to carefully consider our lives and to think intentionally about how we are utilizing the time that God has gifted us. Consider James, Jesus's own half brother. In the letter bearing his name, James addressed his readers saying, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:14). In John 9:4, Jesus put it this way: "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work." In light of eternity, we all have but a moment to "do the works of him who sent [us]"—loving God and loving others through excellent work.

But time isn't the only thing limiting our ability to do everything

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\* Unless you're The Cheesecake Factory: the exception that proves the rule.

we want to do with excellence. We also have limited attention. Perhaps one of today's most widely accepted ideas of productivity is that of multitasking, a myth that the scientific community continues to refute in study after study. It turns out that what we refer to as "multitasking" can be more accurately described as "task shifting," with our brains being forced to shift from one task to the other and back again. These shifts in attention don't make us more productive. In fact, they are terribly detrimental to our pursuit of excellence. One study in particular reports that multitasking decreases overall productivity by up to 40 percent!<sup>12</sup> In order to do our most excellent work, we must focus our full attention in one direction at a time.

So then, how should we respond to the brutal reality of our limited time and attention? As Christians committed to pursuing excellence in all things and all things for the glory of God, we respond by accepting the fact that we can't do everything we want to do professionally, at least not at the same time. Scattering our time and attention across many disparate endeavors will almost assuredly lead to mediocrity, not mastery. Andrew Carnegie once made this case eloquently to a group of college students, saying:

The concerns which fail are those which have scattered their capital, which means that they have scattered their brains also. They have investments in this, or that, or the other, here, there and everywhere. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket" is all wrong. I tell you "put all your eggs in one basket, and then watch that basket." Look round you and take notice; men who do that do not often fail. It is easy to watch and carry the one basket. It is trying to carry too many baskets that breaks most

eggs in this country. He who carries three baskets must put one on his head, which is apt to tumble and trip him up. One fault of the American business man is lack of concentration.<sup>13</sup>

In Ephesians 5:15–16, the apostle Paul implores us to “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” In light of the reality of trade-offs and our limited time and attention, it would be unwise for us to scatter ourselves across many professional pursuits at the same time. The wiser path is the one we will be exploring throughout this book, making every effort to discern the one vocational thing God has called us to in this season of life and working at it with all our hearts (see Colossians 3:23). It is there—in the pursuit of becoming a master of one—that we Christians have our best shot of bringing glory to God and serving our neighbors well through our work. When we say yes to everything, we say yes to nothing, including the unique work the Father has put us on this earth to do.

### LIE #3: YOUR HAPPINESS IS THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF WORK

I’ve saved the most pervasive and deeply entrenched lie for last, as it really sets the tone for the rest of this book. For decades, well-intentioned Christ followers have been doling out a piece of advice that seems loving on the surface but in reality is quite dangerous. The advice goes something like this: “Do whatever makes you happy. Follow your passions. Chase your dreams.” Cal Newport, a professor of computer science at Georgetown University and the best-selling author of *Deep Work* and *So Good They Can’t Ignore You*, calls this conventional wisdom “the

passion hypothesis” in which we are told that “the key to occupational happiness is to first figure out what you’re passionate about and then find a job that matches this passion.”<sup>14</sup> As we will see in chapter 5, identifying our God-given passions is an important step on the path to mastery; but making the pursuit of vocational happiness our primary and most immediate aim turns out to be terrible advice.

Why? Put simply, it doesn’t work. As scientists are beginning to understand, passion *follows* mastery, not the other way around. In his excellent book *So Good They Can’t Ignore You*, Newport cites the work of Amy Wrzesniewski, a professor of organizational behavior at Yale University, who has spent years seeking to understand what leads people across a variety of professions (from doctors to clerical workers and computer programmers) to describe their work as a “calling” as opposed to a “job” or “career.” In one study, Wrzesniewski surveyed a group of college administrative assistants, people with the exact same job responsibilities in roles that few people would choose if they were following the overly simplistic advice to just do what you love. In the study, Wrzesniewski discovered that “the strongest predictor of an assistant seeing her work as a calling was the number of years spent on the job. In other words, the more experience an assistant had, the more likely she was to love her work. . . . In Wrzesniewski’s research, the happiest, most passionate employees are not those who followed their passion into a position, but instead those who have been around long enough to become good at what they do.” Surprisingly, Wrzesniewski was able to find zero evidence to support the conventional wisdom that if you simply seek to do whatever makes you happy by following your passions, you are guaranteed to find a satisfying career. Instead, she discovered that passion is a by-product of mastery.<sup>15</sup>

This startling conclusion flies in the face of conventional wisdom.

In our culture, which demands instant gratification, many of us have bought the lie that we'll discover the deep satisfaction of vocation almost immediately upon finding the job that perfectly matches some preexisting passion. However, that is almost never the case, as scientific studies and the stories of masters throughout this book will show.

As Newport points out, subscribing to the passion hypothesis has dangerous consequences, which, ironically, make us less happy in our work. "The more I studied the issue, the more I noticed that the passion hypothesis convinces people that somewhere there's a magic 'right' job waiting for them, and that if they find it, they'll immediately recognize that this is the work *they were meant to do*," Newport explains. "The problem, of course, is when they fail to find this certainty, bad things follow, such as chronic job-hopping and crippling self-doubt."<sup>16</sup>

As we have already explored, we are seeing more chronic job-hopping today than ever before, with people constantly jumping from gig to gig, intent on finding the immediate satisfaction of vocation, only to be disappointed time and time again. We are failing to take

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from this world.**

the time to become masterful at any one thing, and this is leading to unprecedented levels of unhappiness. According to Mental Health America, "less than one-third of Americans are happy with their work," and "half of the workforce is 'checked-out.'"<sup>17</sup> We have never had more opportunity to do whatever makes us

happy, and yet so few of us love what we do. Clearly, the advice of making our happiness the primary aim of our work isn't working.

For the Christian, this shouldn't come as a surprise. Why? Because this advice is out of line with Jesus's example to serve rather than be served. The passion mind-set focuses exclusively on what value your job offers you. But if our work is to be a calling, we must submit ourselves to the agenda of the One who called us. Following Christ means viewing our entire life (including our work) as service to God and others rather than as a means of getting something from this world.

I don't know if Newport is a Christian, but I do know that he and Wrzesniewski have uncovered a deeply biblical truth at work in the real world: *happiness follows service*. Nowhere in Scripture does it say to follow your passions or do whatever makes you happy. In fact, in some ways, the Bible says the exact opposite. The Christian life is one characterized primarily by service, pouring our lives out as living sacrifices for the sake of God's glory and the good of others (see Romans 12:1). The point of work isn't primarily to make us happy. The point of work is the point of life, summarized by Jesus in Matthew 22: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself" (verses 37, 39).

Let me be clear: I am not saying that our desire to derive happiness from our work is a bad thing. Far from it. In the words of John Piper, "The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful."<sup>18</sup> But, as we will see throughout this book, the way we find the greatest happiness in our work is by prioritizing the joy of God and others above our own, of viewing our work primarily as a means of glorifying God and serving our neighbors rather than ourselves. As we will see in the next two chapters, focused, excellent work accomplishes just that, leading to the deepest, truest, and most sustainable satisfaction of vocation.

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## Chapter Summary

As Christians we are called to pursue excellence in all things as a means of reflecting the character of our exceptional God. This truth, coupled with the laws of time and trade-offs, means that we simply cannot pursue mastery at many things professionally at the same time. It is precisely because we are called to be excellent in all things that we can't commit to being excellent at many things vocationally.

## Key Scripture

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

## Next Action\*

Which of the three lies of work and calling have you believed most fervently in the past? Take a few minutes to think about this and then summarize in your own words how the scriptures in this chapter helped you replace that lie with biblical truth.

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\* In the “Master of One Notebook,” you will find space dedicated to writing out responses to this and other “Next Action” suggestions throughout the book. You can download the free notebook at [jordanraynor.com/MOO](http://jordanraynor.com/MOO).

## Chapter 2

# Proclaiming the Excellencies of God

God is so glorious that it is impossible for you, as his ambassador, to have . . . standards that are too high.

PAUL DAVID TRIPP



The most visited attraction in Barcelona, Spain, is not a theme park, a beach, or a soccer stadium. It's an unfinished church that has been under construction for more than 135 years.<sup>1</sup>

As you approach la Sagrada Família, it's easy to see why more than three million people make the pilgrimage to the church each year. For one thing it is truly awe inspiring, even when compared to Europe's more famous cathedrals such as Notre-Dame in Paris or Westminster Abbey in London. Like something out of a fairy tale, la Sagrada Família resembles the drip sandcastles children make at the beach, only on an extraordinarily larger and more beautiful scale.

As your eyes make their way to the top of this massive structure, the working construction cranes hovering high in the Spanish sky point to the second reason the church is such a draw for world travelers: in an age that prioritizes speed over everything else, the pace at which la Sagrada Família is being built commands our attention. We are used to seeing restaurants get built in weeks, houses go up in months, and skyscrapers rise in just a few years. The idea of spending more than thirteen decades building a single church is simply incomprehensible to most of us. It is that commitment to slow, masterful, excellent work that draws millions of people into this church each year—a church that was intentionally designed to make the world stop and stare at great architecture as a means of pointing us to the glory of God.

Before Antoni Gaudí designed the plans for la Sagrada Família, he had already experienced tremendous success as an architect, using his

signature combination of colorful glass and stone to create some of Barcelona's most famous landmarks, including Park Güell and Casa Batlló. But in 1883, at the age of thirty-one, Gaudí began to catch a vision for la Sagrada Família, the project that would become the magnum opus of his career. From the beginning, Gaudí's vision for the church was enormous. A devout Christian, Gaudí envisioned a single church that would visually tell a comprehensive narrative of the life of Christ. "The temple as a whole, as well as being a place for divine worship, will artistically represent the truths of religion and the glorification of God and His Saints," Gaudí said.<sup>2</sup> His vision was a church that would be the physical representation of the Gospels, designed to quite literally "proclaim the excellencies" of God to the world (1 Peter 2:9, *ESV*).

To do this effectively, Gaudí knew that the church would have to be built on an epic scale. Once construction of the church is completed, la Sagrada Família will be the tallest church building on earth, standing at 560 feet tall. In a conscious effort to prevent his church from surpassing the glory of God's own creation, Gaudí's chosen height for la Sagrada Família is just a few feet short of Montjuïc—the highest natural point in Barcelona. While the height of Gaudí's design is intended to point us to the heavens, it is the rest of this deeply symbolic structure that really declares the glories of God. Once completed, the church will be topped with eighteen spires representing, in ascending order of height, the twelve apostles, the virgin Mary, the four evangelists, and tallest of all, Jesus Christ. At ground level, three grand facades will welcome visitors into the church: the Nativity facade to the east, the Passion facade to the west, and the Glory facade to the south. Today, you can see the completed Nativity and Passion facades, which portray in vivid artistic detail the birth and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. But it's not until visitors step past these facades and into the church that

their jaws really begin to drop. As one well-traveled yet skeptical journalist said:

I passed through the door of the nativity façade—and almost at once, any doubts were expelled. It is the most astonishing space with immediate emotional punch. The scale and colours of the interior are truly magnificent. Bone-like columns twist their way to the ceiling, branching out from ellipsoid knots, reaching upwards, creating the impression of being in an enormous forest. Vast geometric stars decorate the ceiling, punctured by open hyperboloids, sucking in the light and all suggesting the canopy of heaven. The greens, blues, yellows and reds of the light coming through [the] stained-glass windows create a dappled effect with constantly shifting patterns illuminating the stone, decorated by grapes, cherries and flowers. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork” is how Psalm 19 described creation. Gaudí and his successors just copied it. . . . Everywhere you look, the details have been attended to with such meticulous care and attention; everything has a meaning in line with a desire that the building should be a teaching tool, from which the entire history of the church could be read.<sup>3</sup>

Because of Gaudí’s commitment to masterful work, la Sagrada Família quite literally proclaims the gospel to millions of people each year. What can we learn from Gaudí’s example that would inform our own pursuit of masterful work that glorifies God?

First, Gaudí and his church teach us that excellence requires a tremendous amount of hard work. Gaudí spent forty-three years—more than half his life—dedicated to la Sagrada Família. No doubt there

were friends and community members urging Gaudí to take shortcuts so he could see some level of completion of his grand vision in his lifetime. But Gaudí would have none of it. Gaudí knew that mastery requires time, and his vision for the church kept him on a slower, more deliberate path. When asked why the church was taking so long to build, Gaudí once commented, “My client is not in a hurry.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a second lesson we can draw from Gaudí’s story and it is a central theme in this book: masterful work requires tremendous focus. Throughout his four decades working on la Sagrada Família, Gaudí took on fewer and fewer projects until, twelve years prior to his death, he decided to focus exclusively on the building of his church. From 1914 until his death in 1926, Gaudí “dedicated himself exclusively to prayer, to long periods of fasting, and to the construction of la Sagrada Família,”<sup>5</sup> spending most of his days building three-dimensional models of his designs that subsequent generations of architects and craftsmen could follow. A true essentialist, Gaudí went to extremes to eliminate anything from his life that would distract him from his mission of setting la Sagrada Família on a path to its glorious completion after his death. The renowned architect took a vow of poverty, putting himself in the shoes of those his church is meant to serve. In a very real sense, Gaudí poured everything he had into mastering the one thing he believed God was calling him to create. Quite fittingly, Gaudí is buried inside la Sagrada Família, under a headstone that describes the great architect as “a man of exemplary life, and an extraordinary craftsman, the author of this marvelous work.”<sup>6</sup>

Today, dozens of craftspeople continue the work Gaudí started, working diligently to bring la Sagrada Família to its highly anticipated completion (currently slated for 2026). But with an annual construc-

tion budget of nearly \$30 million, this work continues amidst significant debate and controversy, with some arguing that those funds would be better spent more directly on the poor the building is meant to serve. But there's no denying that this costly masterpiece-in-the-making has already produced something of great and increasingly rare value. In an age in which we are addicted to rapid production, quick fixes, fast food, and speed at the cost of everything else, the sheer excellence of la Sagrada Família commands our attention. Then, once it grabs us, the magnificent architecture redirects our gaze to the glory of God and the life of his Son, causing us to yearn to learn more about the exceptional character of the God the church seeks to reflect.

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While most of our work will not proclaim the excellencies of God quite as literally as Gaudí's la Sagrada Família, all of us are commanded to do whatever we do "all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). That means that whether you're a doctor, a sales rep, a janitor, an architect, an athlete, a stay-at-home mom, or an entrepreneur, one of the primary purposes of your work is to glorify God. How do we bring God glory? We reflect his greatness and character to the world. As we've seen, one of his most obvious characteristics is that of excellence. You can't stare out at the Grand Canyon and not marvel at the masterful work of God. You can't go to a zoo without appreciating the creative supremacy of the Creator. And you can't hold a baby without wondering at the excellence it takes to make millions of cells form together to create life. We worship the preeminent God. A perfect God. *Excellent* is far too trite a word to describe the God of the universe, but it is the closest we mere mortals can come to understand. Theologian Andreas J. Köstenberger wrote:

*God is the grounds of all true excellence.* He is the one who fills any definition of excellence with meaning, and he is the reason why we cannot be content with lackluster mediocrity, half-hearted effort, or substandard [work]. Excellence starts and ends with God and is first and foremost a hallmark and attribute of God. Without God as our starting point and continual frame of reference, our discussion of excellence would be hopelessly inadequate.<sup>7</sup>

How then are we to respond to the excellent character of our heavenly Father? In short, we respond by imitating his excellence in everything we do, including our work. I love how novelist-turned-apologist Dorothy Sayers put it in her classic essay, “Why Work?”

[Work] should be looked upon, not as a necessary drudgery to be undergone for the purpose of making money, but as a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God. That it should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God’s image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing. . . .

The Church’s approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables. . . .

[The Church] has forgotten that the secular vocation is sacred. Forgotten that a building must be good architecture before it can be a good church; that a painting must be well painted before it can be a good sacred picture; that work must be good work before it can call itself God's work.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, we glorify God when we imitate his character of excellence and in doing so “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9, *ESV*). We live surrounded by darkness in a world that is desperate for something excellent and true. There is perhaps no more influential sphere of life for us to shine the light of Christ than in our chosen work. When we work with excellence, we have the great privilege of being able to glorify God and proclaim his excellencies to the world around us.

In Ephesians 5:1, Paul likened our efforts to glorify God to the way children naturally imitate their parents when he commanded, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children” (*ESV*). I love this verse because I think we can all understand how the actions of children reflect (for better or worse) the character of their parents. My wife, Kara, and I volunteer in the nursery at our church, and every so often we have one of “those kids” in our class—a toddler who spends the full ninety minutes pushing over towering toys, stealing snacks, and deliberately disobeying authority. One Sunday morning, after the umpteenth time correcting a child like this, I looked at my wife and asked, “Who are this kid’s

**When we work with excellence, we have the great privilege of being able to glorify God and proclaim his excellencies to the world around us.**

parents?” In more subtle ways, the world is asking the same question of you and me. If we say our Father is so good, loving, and excellent, our actions as his children ought to reflect his character. We are the physical representations of God in this world, which is precisely why God has called us to work with excellence, doing everything for his glory. Again, the theologian Köstenberger is worth quoting at some length:

As God’s redeemed children, we are to strive to be like God. This, it appears, includes striving for excellence. . . .

Our creation in God’s image, therefore, primarily relates to the fact that God placed humanity on the earth to rule it as his representatives. How can we best fulfill this role? It stands to reason that as beings created in God’s image, creatures who are called to exercise representative rule over his creation, we must do so with excellence. . . . The world desperately needs to see a display of what God is like. This extends to everything we are and do—our own personal lives, our marriages and families, our moral and ethical standards, and the pursuit of our calling. . . .

Since excellence, then, is an all-encompassing attribute of God, and since we are exhorted in Scripture to imitate God, having been made in his likeness, excellence should mark our lives as his children, extending both to who we are (our character and our relationships) and what we do (our work or vocation). . . .

Excellence is in fact a divine mandate that applies to every aspect of our lives, for God himself is characterized by excellence. Mediocrity, sloppy workmanship, and a half-hearted effort do not bring glory to God or advance his kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

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Slamming his fist against the bathroom stall, David Boudia broke down sobbing. This was not how he envisioned his Olympics ending. Boudia, a diver for the US team, had come to Beijing in 2008 determined to bring home a gold medal. Instead, he finished tenth in his event, seemingly miles away from the coveted Olympic podium.

Shortly after Boudia's disappointing performance, USA Diving hosted a party for the entire team at a restaurant in Beijing. "I suffered through it as one of the worst experiences of my life," Boudia recalled. "The whole party was a somber occasion. I think everyone was bummed because, once again, we didn't win any medals in diving. But the sorrow may have been more painful for me. It was my fault we didn't win any medals. I was in the last event. I could have delivered. . . . Mentally drained, I couldn't put on a tough-guy face anymore. I still didn't let anyone see me cry, but I left the dinner party and locked myself in a bathroom stall, where all the heartache and disappointment came pouring out in a torrent of tears."<sup>10</sup>

Nobody makes it to the Olympics without passionately pursuing mastery of their sport. Olympians are "the best of the best of the best,"\* but they don't get there by accident. Elite athletes know that excellence requires years of purposeful practice and discipline (subjects we will explore further in chapter 8). But as Boudia's story so powerfully demonstrates, there's a world of difference between being motivated to pursue excellence for your own glory and pursuing excellence for the glory of God.

Like so many world-class athletes, Boudia was laser focused on the Olympics from an early age. After being mesmerized by the 1996

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\* A reference for my fellow *Men in Black* fans. "With honors!"

Olympics at the age of seven, “competing in the Olympics became my focus, my inspiration, my dream, my god,” Boudia explained. “I was going to be an Olympian. Not only that, but I was going to win—and I would revel in the fame and the celebrity it brought. And in the years that followed, I bowed at the feet of gods fashioned of gold, silver, and bronze.”<sup>11</sup>

For Boudia, dreams of Olympic medals represented the more deeply entrenched idols in his heart. Like so many others, he wasn’t motivated to pursue excellence for the sheer joy of mastering a craft and revealing the character of God in the process. “My only desire in life was to please myself,” Boudia noted. “A gold medal would mean fame and adoration. A gold medal would mean success. It would mean acceptance. It would mean happiness and joy. So, relentlessly and doggedly, that’s what I chased.”<sup>12</sup>

It was clear from a young age that Boudia had a real shot at Olympic glory, either in gymnastics (his first sport) or in diving. For years his athletic success delivered the emotional high Boudia was looking for, feeding his desire for recognition and acceptance. But it didn’t take long for Boudia to recognize that these were counterfeit gods. “When you live for the praise of other people, you can never be satisfied,” he said, reflecting on his early years as a competitive athlete. “The ecstasy from a win today quickly fades, and you have to win tomorrow to recapture that high. It’s a relentless, unsatisfying, and elusive quest when you are fueled by the pursuit of your own glory.”<sup>13</sup>

That “elusive quest” is what led Boudia to angrily rage against the bathroom stall in Beijing. While his teammates, coaches, and parents were enjoying just being at the Olympics, Boudia couldn’t handle the agony of defeat. “My god had betrayed me,” Boudia said. “The one I had served for so long, the one I had worked for and sacrificed for, the

one whose approval I so desperately sought, the one I was willing to do anything to appease had toyed with me and promised me something that it didn't deliver. It had beaten me down and crushed me in return for all I had given. Never in my life had I been so distraught."<sup>14</sup>

After leaving Beijing, Boudia returned to school at Purdue University and entered the deepest depression of his life. One night, while the rest of campus watched the Purdue Boilermakers take on Notre Dame on the football field, Boudia locked himself in his dorm room and seriously considered taking his own life. "Nothing made sense to me whatsoever, and I felt emptier than I had my entire life," Boudia shared. "I sat there looking at an orange wall in my room, thinking that life was pointless. I was desperate for relief from my hopeless existence. I thought this life was pointless, and I wanted it to be over. What I didn't know was that life was just about to begin."<sup>15</sup>

Boudia pulled out his phone and texted Ashley Karnes, a diving teammate he used to party with who had recently started opting out of that lifestyle. Karnes suggested that Boudia text their coach, Adam Soldati, a Christian who had earned the respect of Boudia, Karnes, and other divers. Willing to try anything to relieve his deep emotional pain, Boudia texted Soldati, who suggested they get together the next day.

When Boudia arrived at Soldati's home, he wasn't sure what to expect. He surely wasn't expecting to be presented with the gospel. But that's precisely what Soldati did. As Boudia recalled, "Adam gently pointed out that given my struggles, the way I had been living didn't seem to be working out too well. He was absolutely right. Living for myself and my own pleasures had gotten me nowhere fast. . . . God had given me that hunger and thirst for satisfaction that could only be found in a relationship with him."<sup>16</sup>

That conversation changed Boudia's life forever, bringing him to

saving faith in Jesus Christ and radically changing how he viewed his work as a diver. Boudia understood that because God loved him, he no longer had to earn gold medals to win God's favor. He was loved and accepted just as he was.

At first this led Boudia to lose his appetite and passion for diving and nearly abandon his one professional thing. But through the wise counsel of his pastor, Boudia came to realize that he could continue to pursue mastery of his craft as a diver not for his own glory but with the redeemed ambition that seeks to reveal the greatness of God through excellent work. "In those sessions with [my pastor], he began teaching me that just because I was a Christian, and just because Jesus was my highest priority, that didn't give me license to slack off in the other areas of my life. That wasn't glorifying to God," Boudia said. "[He] showed me that God had given me my ability to dive, and that was a platform for me to share the testimony of what God had done for me. I didn't understand it at the time, but I slowly began to learn that I could dive for a purpose. That purpose was to be a visible representation of an invisible God."<sup>17</sup>

Boudia was coming to learn the truth we have been exploring in this chapter: the purpose of focused, masterful work isn't for our own glory but to glorify God by reflecting his character of excellence to the world. It was only after Boudia found this redeemed purpose for his work as a diver that he regained his ambition for the sport. "Once those lessons took root in my life, I started to pour my heart into diving practice again," Boudia explained. "I began working hard and not neglecting my responsibilities. It's easy for me to push my duties aside if I don't want to do them, but my growth in the Lord showed me that a man after God's heart does hard things."<sup>18</sup>

With ambition rooted in a desire to proclaim the excellencies of

God rather than making a name for himself, Boudia worked harder and with more focus than ever before. Once again, he was focused on winning the Olympic games. “But this time,” Boudia said, “I would not zealously chase a gold medal and worldly success to satisfy my selfish desires for glory. This time, I would be solely concerned with bringing glory to God. . . . This time, I would do my best and be content with whatever the results were, as long as I was doing everything to please the Lord by being a witness for him.”<sup>19</sup>

Since Boudia’s radical conversion he has experienced both victory and defeat in the pool. At the 2012 Olympics in London, Boudia fulfilled his lifelong dream of standing on the podium with a gold medal around his neck. However, in 2016, Boudia and his partner, Steele Johnson, finished second to the Chinese in the synchronized diving event at the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. But instead of spending the night punching a bathroom stall, Boudia had deep, genuine joy. In a postdive interview, a reporter asked the duo how they were holding up after finishing second in an event with “a whole lot of pressure.” Boudia replied, “When my mind is on [diving] and thinking I’m defined by [diving], then my mind goes crazy. But we both know that our identity is in Christ.” Johnson (also a Christian) added, “The fact that I was going into this event knowing that my identity is rooted in Christ and not what the result of this competition is gave me peace, gave me ease, and it let me enjoy the contest.”<sup>20</sup>

**Because the gospel frees us from the requirement to win, we gain a deep desire to master our work and proclaim the excellencies of God in the process.**

The divers’ comments reflect an important point that is critical for

us to understand: in victory or defeat, success or failure, we can glorify God by passionately pursuing excellence and seeking to be the very best version of who God created us to be. Nowhere in Scripture does God command success or certain levels of performance. Because of the work of Jesus on our behalf, we don't need to use our work in some misguided attempt to save ourselves or, like a younger Boudia, to prove to the world that we are valuable. We are valuable and worthy because Christ loves us, not because of any level of success we may attain in our careers. It is that very security in Christ alone that frees us to pursue mastery in our work for his glory rather than our own. And *that* is what leads us to "work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men" (Colossians 3:23, ESV), giving us the deep, lasting, sustainable ambition to work with the highest standards of excellence. Because the gospel frees us from the *requirement* to win, we gain a deep *desire* to master our work and proclaim the excellencies of God in the process.

As Boudia shared, "Christians follow the Lord by doing everything with excellence because God does all things with excellence. Being excellent is a character trait of God, so when we pursue it, we are modeling ourselves after him. When I compete, I'm doing it for the glory of God. In any given competition I can be a finger pointing to God's goodness and a light shining on his faithfulness. I don't have to tear others down or do whatever it takes to win. If I choose to do it that way, that's disobedience and a perversion of what God requires of us. But to work hard and do my best, to love others around me, that brings honor to God when I'm on the platform."<sup>21</sup>

As exemplified by Boudia and Gaudí, one of the purposes of focused, masterful work is demonstrating our love for our Father by reflecting his image and character of excellence to the world around us.

We'll see in the next chapter that exceptional work also helps us follow the second Greatest Commandment: loving our neighbors as ourselves.

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### **Chapter Summary**

As God's children we are called to be his image bearers, reflecting his character of excellence in every aspect of life, including our work. Thus, one of the most fundamental purposes of pursuing mastery in our work is the pursuit of God's glory. We glorify him and proclaim his excellencies when we do our work masterfully well.

### **Key Scripture**

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9, *ESV*).

### **Next Action**

Write a prayer praising God for his character of excellence and asking him to guide you as you pursue mastery in your work for his glory.



## Chapter 3

# The Ministry of Excellence

If you are a craftsman you will find the Bible placed in your workshop, in your hands, in your heart; it teaches and preaches how you ought to treat your neighbor. Only look at your tools, your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel, your articles of trade, your scales, your measures, and you will find this saying written on them . . . “use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his.”

MARTIN LUTHER



Jessica Jones has always passionately pursued excellence in her work as a nurse practitioner in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). Her career started with an internship at the prestigious Children's Hospital of Philadelphia where she learned from some of the best doctors in the world how to care for sick and premature newborn babies. Since then, Jones has treated hundreds of babies, consoled as many mothers and fathers, and acquired thousands of hours of purposeful practice, spending years getting masterful at her one vocation.

While Jones has always had high standards of excellence in her work, it was when she became a mother herself that her motivation for mastery at her craft reached a new and higher level. "Becoming a mom changed everything for me," Jones said. "My first few weeks back to work after the birth of my first child were difficult. Every sick baby I saw could have been my baby. I think there's a certain compassion and understanding that women gain when they enter motherhood. Working in the NICU and seeing these moms in their most vulnerable state tends to magnify that. Before I was a mom, I think I had a pretty good idea of what it looked like to 'love my neighbor' through my work. But after the birth of my son, I had a much greater appreciation for what it meant to 'love my neighbor *as myself*' and that motivated me to get even better at my job."

Even today, with nearly two decades of experience to her credit, Jones is continuing to push herself to be an even better medical professional, asking doctors for feedback on her work, spending her

downtime in the hospital reading medical journals, and regularly praying that God would continue to develop her skills as a nurse practitioner. What drives Jones in this persistent pursuit of excellence? “I truly see my work as ministry,” she said.

When you first hear Jones describe her work as “ministry,” you might assume that she spends hours praying or sharing the gospel with her patients’ parents, who are often searching for hope when their newborn baby is in such a fragile state. “While there have certainly been situations in which I’ve had the opportunity to minister to patients in that way, it is far from the norm. That’s not primarily what I mean when I describe my work as ministry,” Jones explained. “I have the unique opportunity to be around families at the most exciting and often the scariest time of their lives. I have a chance to not just be good at what I do, but to do my work with excellence because I am doing it for a higher purpose, and that is to show the love of Christ to my neighbor, to those mothers and fathers who are hurting and scared.”

Jones understands that while excellent work often produces influence, power, and opportunities for Christians to share the gospel, those

**As Christians, we can’t say we are seeking to love our neighbor as ourselves and then do our work with mediocrity.**

good things are not the primary purpose of mastery. The most fundamental reason why we Christians ought to pursue excellence in our work is to bring glory to God and love our neighbors as ourselves. “I am doing ministry when I do my work with excellence,” Jones shared, “taking my God-given gifts and using them to the best of my

ability to bring these newborns back to full health. That is how I love my neighbor as myself.”<sup>1</sup>

In many ways Jones is everything you would want in a medical professional who is treating your child. She is kind, warm, and patient, but most important to her patients, Jones is masterful at her craft. Most parents of Jones's patients aren't interested to know if she goes to church, what her religious beliefs are, or if she wears a cross around her neck. At the end of the day, they don't really care if she is warm and personable. When their children's lives are on the line, all these parents care about is whether or not Jones is a master of her craft and whether or not she is able to bring their babies back to full health. The primary purpose of Jones's excellent work is loving and serving her neighbors as she would want another medical professional to serve her child if she were on the other side of the waiting room.

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As we will see in part 3 of this book, the promise of masterful work is great: God uses our excellent work to make Christians winsome to the world, leading to opportunities to share the gospel and do what many would consider more overt ministry. While all these gifts are wonderful, God-honoring things that should motivate us in our pursuit of mastery, they are not the most fundamental purpose of excellent work, as Jones's testimony makes clear. We ought to pursue excellence in our work not as a means to an end, but as a simple act of obedience to the Lord's command to glorify God and, in the words of Jesus, to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

Notice that, in summarizing the Greatest Commandments, Jesus didn't say, "Love your neighbor as yourself . . . so that you can share the gospel," or "Love your neighbor as yourself . . . in order to obtain cultural influence." "Love your neighbor as yourself" was a complete sentence. Simply loving our neighbor is good and God-honoring in and of

itself and is the foundational purpose for focused, masterful work, as well as the most fundamental way we make ourselves useful to the world. As Christians, we can't say we are seeking to love our neighbor as ourselves and then do our work with mediocrity. In some professions (like Jones's), mediocre work can result in the loss of life. For most of us the relative skill of our work isn't going to mean the difference between life and death, but we all have an opportunity to obey Jesus's command to love our neighbors as ourselves by choosing to do excellent work. My friend Matt Perman provides a great example of this in his book *What's Best Next*:

One summer after some especially heavy rains, three sump pumps went out on our street, all on the same day. . . . The reason, as we eventually learned, is that the builders decided to use the cheapest sump pumps they could find rather than spending a couple hundred dollars more to get higher quality pumps. The result of their poor workmanship was a flooded basement.

The builder was seeking to save himself a few hundred dollars on each house built, but in order to do so, he passed a far greater cost onto me, the owner. I paid with my time and an insurance deductible, and my insurance company paid for new carpet and baseboards. Our builder made life easier on himself at the cost of making it harder on us.

That is not what I would call good work . . . .

Christians are to . . . do work that will truly benefit people by going the extra mile rather than just doing the minimum necessary. Excellence in our work is actually a form of generosity and *love*, and poor quality is a form of stinginess and selfish-

ness. Shoddy work is not just shoddy work; it's a failure of love.

This means we are to be generous not just with the results of our work but also *in* our work. One of the best forms of generosity in our work is *excellence*. Excellence matters not only because it is right and exciting in itself, but even more significantly because it is a way of serving people.<sup>2</sup>

Expounding upon this same idea, pastor Timothy Keller said, "One of the main ways that you love others in your work is through the 'ministry of competence.' If God's purpose for your job is that you serve the human community, then the way to serve God best is to do the job as well as it can be done."<sup>3</sup>

Keller is spot-on; but I think it's necessary to extend Keller's comments beyond the idea of "competence," as that word often connotes simple adequacy or a baseline standard that one must achieve in order to call a job done. We might say that the builder of Perman's home was competent as he technically got the job done and delivered a home that was inhabitable by Perman and his family. But nobody would say this builder did his work masterfully well, and that unwillingness to go the extra mile produced suffering for his neighbor—the very opposite of love. As Christians we are called to much more than mere competency in our chosen work. We are called to mastery, striving for excellence in all things, and it is through the ministry of *excellence* that we best love our neighbors through our work.

**It is through the  
ministry of excellence  
that we best love  
our neighbors  
through our work.**

If the church were to embrace this generous, selfless, sacrificial vision for excellent work, the world would have to take notice, as this approach to work is so countercultural today. Perhaps no book summarizes the metanarrative of our culture's view on work better than *The 4-Hour Workweek* by Tim Ferriss. I have long had a complicated relationship with this book. I love *The 4-Hour Workweek* because I think Ferriss offers some brilliant, practical tips for how to be more productive in life, but I strongly disagree with the reasons why so many people are subscribing to Ferriss's helpful life hacks. Most of the Ferriss disciples I've met through the years are desperately trying to figure out how they can do the bare minimum amount of work needed to support a luxury lifestyle, jet-set around the world, and spend their days kicking back on a hammock on the beach.

This is not the picture the Bible paints for the life of the Christian. Yes, the Bible is clear that we should enjoy the good gifts God has given us in this life. But as the life of Christ so beautifully demonstrates, we aren't here on this earth primarily to maximize our pleasure. Our purpose isn't *to use* the world but to be of the utmost *use to* the world. Our purpose is to glorify God and love others, thereby reflecting the life of Christ. In the words of Paul in Romans 12:1, "In view of God's mercy," we are called to "offer [our] bodies as a living sacrifice," going far beyond the minimum standards in our chosen work and passionately pursuing excellence for the glory of God and the good of others. I love how John Mark Comer puts it:

God made the world, not to get something from us, but rather as a gift for us to enjoy and play in and make something of. In the same way, when we live and work, not to get what we can from others, but rather to love and serve them, we're harmo-

nizing with the heart of God himself. And one of the best possible ways we can love and serve people is to show up for work every day. And to do our work, not to get ahead, or make more money, or become famous, but to love and serve God and neighbor. And when we do that, we start to reclaim our humanness.<sup>4</sup>

As Comer put so well, the purpose of mastery isn't to acquire our own fame or fortune. The purpose of mastery is to glorify God and love our neighbors as ourselves. As Christians we shouldn't seek to do the bare minimum in our jobs to collect a paycheck. If we believe our work is a calling from God, we will "work heartily, as for the Lord," seeking to glorify God and love others well by being the very best nurse practitioners, entrepreneurs, teachers, artists, carpenters, and executives we can possibly be. Our desire to love our neighbors through the ministry of excellence will lead us to view our work more sacrificially; and as the following story of Cynthia Marshall shows, it will also cause us to work with a tremendous amount of focus.

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When Mark Cuban placed the phone call, he was hoping to reach Cynthia Marshall. Instead, Marshall's husband, Kenneth, picked up the line since his wife was on another call. Assuming a call from a celebrity like Cuban was a good enough reason to interrupt his wife, Kenneth caught Cynthia's attention, motioned to the phone, and loudly whispered, "It's Mark Cuban!"

"Who?" Cynthia whispered back.

"*Shark Tank!*" Kenneth replied.

Cynthia responded with a blank stare.

“The *billionaire* . . . the owner of the Dallas Mavericks,” Kenneth continued, looking for a reaction from his wife. Still nothing. Now realizing that his wife had never heard of Cuban before, Kenneth insisted: “Get off that phone!”<sup>5</sup>

Mark Cuban was in crisis mode, and he was calling to ask for Cynthia’s help. The #MeToo movement was in full swing, with women all around the world bravely coming forward to name high-profile men who had sexually harassed them. The wave of scandals had already taken down titans of entertainment, politics, and sports, but a new investigative report by *Sports Illustrated* had exposed the Dallas Mavericks organization and its former CEO Terdemma Ussery, as one of the most egregious cases reported to date. The article cited more than a dozen former Mavericks employees who told abhorrent stories of verbal and sexual harassment over the course of two decades, painting a picture of “a corporate culture rife with misogyny and predatory sexual behavior.” One former Mavericks employee described the organization as “a real life *Animal House*.”<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing the magnitude of the problem on his hands, Cuban moved quickly to fix the Mavericks’ culture. While he had already kicked off an independent investigation into the allegations, he knew that wasn’t enough. Cuban needed a new CEO to radically transform the Mavericks’ toxic environment. Through his search he learned about Cynthia Marshall, who seemed like the perfect fit. Marshall was recommended to Cuban by executives at AT&T, where Marshall had spent thirty-six years as a highly respected human resources executive. Marshall’s former colleagues assured Cuban that she was the perfect person to turn around the Mavericks organization. If she accepted Cuban’s offer, Marshall would become the first female African American CEO in the NBA’s seventy-two-year history.

The fact that Marshall was being offered this position is an incredible testament to God's sovereignty and grace. Marshall grew up in the projects outside San Francisco. While the hardship of economic poverty was certainly tough on Marshall, her siblings, and her mother, it was nothing compared to the emotional and physical pain inflicted on the family by Marshall's father. On one occasion Marshall stepped between her mother and her father's fist, taking a blow to the face, which broke her nose.<sup>7</sup> When she was fifteen, Marshall's father left the family, but not before delivering some final verbal abuse. As Marshall recalled, "He told me and my youngest sister that we would be hookers on the street without him. I told my sister, 'That's not true. We are going to be the first in this family to graduate from college. I'm going to get mom out of these projects.'"<sup>8</sup>

All of this trauma at such a formative age had a huge impact on Marshall's vision for her future. Given her upbringing, Marshall decided quickly what she wanted to do with her career: she would excel in the discipline of human resources. Knowing firsthand the tremendous pain verbal and physical abuse can inflict, Marshall wanted to spend her career loving others well, and she knew it was going to take a tremendous amount of sacrifice and focus to do that work with excellence.

Just a few years after her father abandoned her family, Marshall made good on her promise, becoming the first in her family to go to college. She received a full scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley, where she earned two degrees: one in human resources management and another in business administration.<sup>9</sup> Throughout college, Marshall's desire to love her neighbor as herself pushed her to pursue her work with great intensity. She remembers thinking, "I have too many people depending on me and these people told me to focus. I said, 'I gotta focus.'" In fact, she was so focused that she broke up with

her boyfriend during her first week of college so that she could concentrate on her schoolwork. Marshall told her boyfriend, “I’ll call you when I graduate,” she recalled. “I told him I have to focus. I told him I don’t have time for some smooth-talking cutie who wants to play when I need to study.” On graduation day Marshall did call her ex-boyfriend, Kenneth, to whom she has been married for nearly thirty years.<sup>10</sup>

Marshall’s intense focus on mastering her one thing paid off. Almost immediately after graduating from Berkeley, Marshall landed a job at AT&T, where she quickly moved up the corporate ladder and became known as an excellent and compassionate human resources executive. By the time she retired from AT&T thirty-six years later, she had risen to the position of chief diversity officer and senior vice president of human resources, a role that made her responsible for developing and directing human resources programs for AT&T’s 240,000 employees. Marshall spent more than three decades mastering the practice of human resources, putting herself in a position to serve nearly a quarter of a million people, working to ensure that all of AT&T’s employees were emotionally and physically safe—a luxury Marshall wishes she had as a young woman.

By the time Mark Cuban called, Marshall had retired from AT&T and was looking forward to the next chapter of her career as a consultant. But Cuban was hoping to convince Marshall to step back into full-time service, this time leveraging her masterful skills as a human resources executive to serve other women in what was now one of the most closely watched organizations in the world. As her husband quickly realized, Marshall had no clue who Cuban was. Furthermore, she knew nothing about the *Sports Illustrated* exposé on Cuban’s Mavericks. After agreeing to meet with the team’s billionaire owner, she picked up a copy of the magazine. “And I’m reading about it, and I’m

getting sick,” Marshall recalled. “Like, what’s going on in this place? I mean, this culture’s bad. I don’t know if I want to do this.”<sup>11</sup>

In fact, Marshall was pretty certain she didn’t want the job as CEO of the Mavericks. But after meeting some of the women within the Mavericks organization, she knew she had to accept Cuban’s offer. As she looked into their eyes and shook their hands, these women said, “We need you. We absolutely need you.”<sup>12</sup> Like the rest of the world, Marshall was sick of the seemingly endless barrage of sexual harassment allegations. As Marshall recalled, “I’m yelling at the TV all the time when something happens, when the #MeToo stuff is coming out, saying this is ridiculous. How can that happen?”<sup>13</sup> Due to her focused commitment to her one thing, Marshall had the skills and expertise to fix the Mavericks’ problems and love her neighbors as herself in the process. “When [Cuban’s] call came, I thought, I can’t just sit on the sidelines. Instead of yelling at the TV, I’m being called into service. I’m doing this for the sisterhood.”<sup>14</sup>

An interviewer once asked Marshall what she wants people to think about when they remember her. Her response was simple: “That she loves God and she loves people.”<sup>15</sup> Through focused, excellent work, Marshall does exactly that. By pursuing mastery of her one thing, the Lord has used Marshall to love and serve the vulnerable she feels called to protect.

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As we have seen in the first part of this book, the purpose of mastery in our work is not to accumulate fame and fortune for ourselves or to subsidize our lifestyle. It’s not even primarily a means to earn credibility and power or to share the gospel. The most fundamental purpose of mastery is the same as our purpose in life: to glorify God and love and

serve others as ourselves. As the masters in these chapters have demonstrated, focused, excellent work accomplishes just that. Antoni Gaudí showed us how a commitment to masterful work produced a church that declares the glory of God nearly a hundred years after the great architect's death. David Boudia demonstrates what it looks like practically to be motivated to pursue mastery for the glory of God rather than personal gain. And Jessica Jones and Cynthia Marshall show us how focused, masterful work allows us to live out the ministry of excellence, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The case I have been building up to this point is that as Christians we live out the Greatest Commandments through our vocations when we do our work with focus and excellence. With this as our foundation, there are still a number of big questions for us to answer. For starters, what are the practical ways we can discern which work God has equipped us to do masterfully well? How do we know when we've found the one thing the Lord is calling us to do? Once we have a clear path, how do we eliminate things that are distracting us from our chosen work? Finally, what can we learn from scientific research and the stories of Christ-following masters about how to become masterful in our one thing? Those are the questions we now turn to in part 2.

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## Chapter Summary

If the first, most fundamental purpose of masterful work is to bring God glory, the second is to love our neighbors as ourselves. We ought to pursue excellence in our work not as a means to an end but in obedience to what Jesus identified as the Greatest Commandments. As Christians

we can't claim to love our neighbor as ourselves and then do our work with mediocrity. Mediocre work is nothing short of a failure of love. It is through the ministry of excellence that we love our neighbors through our work.

### **Key Scripture**

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–39).

### **Next Action**

Write down one thing you could do in your current work to go beyond the minimum standards and more excellently serve your employer, employees, or customers.

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